

Georgia's Declaration of Independence

How it came to be recorded

On January 18, 1777, Congress was meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. Although copies of the Declaration of Independence had already circulated throughout the colonies, Congress ordered that copies be printed by Mary Katherine Goddard of Baltimore and be sent to each of the 13 states. They stipulated two things about these copies: that they contain the names of everyone who had signed the original Declaration, and that each state specifically be requested to make the Declaration a part of its official records.

When the copies of the Declaration arrived in the states, some states (such as Maryland and Connecticut) entered the Declaration in their official records by inserting the printed copy in their record books. Other states, including Georgia, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, created an official record by hand-copying the Declaration into their state record books.

Georgia's copy was officially entered into the records on March 2, 1777, along with a notation: "In Congress, January 18, 1777. Ordered: That an authenticated copy of the Declaration of Independency with the names of the Members of Congress, Subscribing the same, be sent to each of the United States, and that they be desired to have the same put on Record. By Order of Congress, John Hancock, Presid^t. Recorded 2nd March 1777."

At the time the Declaration was recorded, Georgia was undergoing a tumultuous time: state leaders were still uncertain as to the loyalties of many of the people, and only a few days before, Governor Archibald Bulloch had died under mysterious circumstances. Still, the state managed to record its copy and make the Declaration an official part of the state's records. The document went on to survive the turmoil of the Revolution.

How its memory faded

At one time, probably long before the state archives was established in 1918, the Declaration was bound into a large volume of records that spanned several decades of the 18th and 19th centuries. The documents in this book that date from 1777 and 1778 are bound together with documents from the 1790s. It is believed they were disordered before or soon after 1827, perhaps during rebinding. In 1945 the single, large volume was broken down as a preservation measure and rebound into two smaller volumes. At that time, the spine of the volume that contains the Declaration was labeled "State Officers Appointments, 1789-1827," an incomplete title for the many documents found in the volume. Although the front of the volume contains an index, the records in the volume were little used. In an age before computer indexing, knowledge about the records in the archives depended to a great extent on the memories of staff. Over the years, fewer and fewer people remembered the existence of the Declaration.

In January 2007, an archives staff member was conducting research for a patron who was seeking a Revolutionary War ancestor. After exhausting all of his known sources, Greg Jarrell asked other reference staff for suggestions. Andy Phrydas remembered a microfilm reel that contained some seldom-used Revolutionary era documents. As Greg scanned the index he saw the words, "Declaration of Independence." He scrolled to the spot on the film and saw the recording date, which indicated a document contemporaneous with the original. He retrieved the

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original volume from the vaults and found Georgia's official record of the Declaration of Independence.

How do we know it's really from 1777?

Staff from the archives have determined from internal evidence that the text of the Declaration probably was copied into the record book by Samuel Stirk, acting as secretary of the Council of Safety. Several signed entries in the book were inscribed by Stirk and other recorders. The handwriting appears to be that of Stirk. A watermark that appears on the Declaration and its introductory blank page is found throughout this volume and Part 1 of the same book, confirming that the paper was produced during this period. The iron gall ink is consistent with inks of the period as well.

Why is it important?

The most famous copies of the Declaration are the Dunlap broadsides, a printed version produced on July 4, 1776, that did not include the names of the signers for fear of British reprisals. But for all their rarity, the Dunlap broadsides are not official copies of the document. Georgia's recorded copy is the state's official record of one of the most important moments in the history of our country, made at the time of the event, and preserved through the turmoil of the American Revolution, the Civil War, and countless changes of government and society since 1777. The distinctiveness of its survival is underscored by the fact that at least three of the original colonies have no contemporaneous copy of the Declaration among their records.

Where is it kept?

The Declaration remains in the safety of the Georgia Archives, now carefully noted in the archives computer systems to prevent its ever being lost again. The Declaration joins other "birth documents" of Georgia, including the Royal Charter—the 1732 document that created Georgia as a colony—and Georgia's Ratification of the U.S. Constitution—the 1788 document that made Georgia a state. All are kept in a high security vault where a constant temperature and humidity are maintained to ensure their long-term survival.